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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Committee business

Comité permanent des comptes publics

Travaux du comité

Chair: Ernie Hardeman
Clerk: Katch Koch

Président : Ernie Hardeman
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voting for it, but if it does not pass, could the direction then be that the next time we have deputants scheduled for a review, we schedule an entire day with the auditor, and then the following week? I know it would be inconvenient for some of the deputy ministers to come in for an hour and a bit in the morning and then to come back in for the afternoon, but it would give us an opportunity to have at least a couple more rounds for discussion with them.

0910

I agree with Mr. Hillier and I agree with Mr. Fraser: Sometimes we get them in and we're on a roll. Other times you come in and we really don't need the extra time, but there are days where it's the reality that we want them back. If that's a possibility, I'm going to suggest that we do that in the future, because there have been days where I think that if we had the auditor even longer, that would be good too.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): It's a possibility, but we cannot decide whether the committee wishes to do that while this motion is on the floor.

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: Okay.

Mr. John Fraser: Like I said earlier in my remarks, we have a lot of flexibility. The two things that we have are our flexibility and our desire to get through as many reports as we can, and we have to balance that.

On top of that, we all have legislative work and work in our own communities. I have work as a PA. When I break up a week, there is not enough time to do all the things that I believe are important to do. I think we all have that experience. If something is important enough that we want to allocate more time, then I think we need to do that inside the time that we are given.

That's how we operate here: Generally as a Legislature we have some flexibility but very fixed times, and that's to make sure that we apportion our work appropriately. If something needs more focus, then we have to try to do that inside that allotted time, right? We don't necessarily extend question period by an hour because we have more questions to ask. We have an hour a day. We focus on that hour and make sure that inside that hour, the work that we do is the work that's of the highest priority.

I'm just saying that we need to apply that same principle here. I understand what the member opposite is saying. If we decide that we want to go in a certain direction and we want to change how we approach the report and extend more time for briefing, I would suggest that we have to spend more time individually preparing, but I'm open to that. We can do that.

We do have to remember that it's just like the hour-long question period: If you decide you want to ask six questions about this, you're not going to get to ask the question about that. That's how this place works.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Okay. Any further—

Mr. Randy Hillier: Yes. When you say that we have lots of flexibility, I don't share that view, in that, yes, we can bring somebody back, but then we lose out on the

back end. We will not get to go through more elements, so there's a significant trade-off.

My suggestion is that if there is an interest by a majority of the committee that we have a deputant here, that we all believe that there is greater value in continuing a line of questioning, we permit ourselves the opportunity to do so. That's not to suggest that it will happen every time or all the time.

There are things that we hear and that we become aware of through the examination process. You're talking about preparation. Although it has merit, it doesn't address the fact that there are elements that come up through the examination process, through the discussion process.

I don't want to belabour this too much. I think it's a fair and reasonable motion to provide the committee with greater latitude. I think the committee will exercise that latitude in a thoughtful manner, but, as we're seeing right now, having a discussion of the motion is chewing into the auditor's time to give us a briefing.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Any further discussion? Mr. Delaney.

Mr. Bob Delaney: Chair, normally this type of change to a committee's operating procedure is driven by a discussion among the House leaders, and I've not heard any mention of a discussion among the House leaders. As Mr. Vanthof knows, when we both served as our respective whips, some of the problems here with the motion are logistical ones in which you don't really have a lot of bodies to go around. Sometimes you've got to figure on calculating who's going to be in the House to keep quorum, based upon the hours of a committee. You'd make the assumption that when the committee is finished, it's going to free up some of its members to keep quorum.

As well, Mr. Fraser accurately mentioned that nearly all the government members need to spend a little bit of time among the folks in their various ministries, who have a hard enough time getting hold of either the minister or the PA. Certainly, members on the government side who are not ministers are juggling both their legislative duties and their PA duties. If this proposal has merit, I would suggest, respectfully, to the member that he work that up through the House leaders before bringing it to the committee.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): In process, I would just point out with the last comment that in fact this motion is not, as I read it—we're not debating doing it; we're debating whether the committee wishes to ask the House leaders to have that discussion. Okay? Mr. Hillier.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I don't want to tread on somebody else's responsibility. The House leaders have different considerations to consider. This is a motion from the committee members. Do we as committee members think that it would be appropriate for us to have greater latitude and, if so, do we support the idea of asking the House leaders to address it?

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Okay. Any further discussion?

Mr. John Fraser: I can't support any letter, for the reasons I've stated.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): If there's no further discussion, all those in favour? Opposed? The motion is lost.

Before we leave this: In the previous discussion about what we could do, I would just suggest to all the committee members that when we do the next one, we are very cautious to stay on the issues that relate to the hearing we're going to do after lunch. Most of the time, we would do it in sufficient time, but the reason I mention that is that that part of the meeting can be continued after the deputants, too, without any changes, because they're scheduled. You can do them during the report writing. So if there are broader questions that you have about the

auditor's report that are not going to relate directly to the hearing that afternoon, we can do that in the first stage of the report writing. The auditor will be there and we can ask all those questions.

I would caution if the committee is considering changing the time to go into the afternoon, because it's really not fair to invite people to come all afternoon and then find out that they aren't going to be heard that day. That's an awful lot of talent sitting in the room and twiddling their thumbs waiting for something to happen. I would just throw that out there that, at any time you wish, we can move some of the briefing from the auditor into the next session, as opposed to that afternoon's session.

With that, we will now go into closed session to do report writing.

The committee continued in closed session at 0919.

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